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Write for Review, Not You

This presentation provides an inside look at the peer review process for Federal discretionary grants. The people who read and score discretionary grant applications are “peer reviewers”. They are the major hurdle to a grant award; how they score an application usually decides who wins and who loses. These tips are applicable to any grant proposal in any subject area for Federal grant programs, as well as proposals for private and corporate funders.

Bette Hartnett has reviewed grant applications for several programs for the U. S. Department of Education, as well as the Nevada Department of Education. She has worked in California, Wyoming, and online education K-University for 25 years as a science and education teacher, lecturer, and associate professor; teacher mentor; California state science exam writer; and grant professional. Bette began writing grant applications for private and corporate funding in her "spare time" to fund her own high school science program. In four years she brought in nearly \$500,000 for her students, colleagues, the high school, and teachers throughout the school district; two of her applications won funder awards.

From 2006-2013, Bette was the sole discretionary grant professional at the Nevada Department of Education. In 2006, she began working as a peer reviewer for U.S. Department of Education grant programs in order to refine her own skills. In doing so, she gained insight into how Federal grants are funded and what constitutes a competitive, high-quality application. In less than seven years she has brought more than \$110 million in Federal, private, and corporate grant funds to Nevada education, as well as collaborated on successful applications for other State agencies.

Write for Review, Not You: Federal Discretionary Grant Peer Reviews

THE REVIEW

Discretionary (competitive) grant applications submitted to Federal agencies are generally required to be read and scored by one or more independent “peer reviewers” (for this presentation peer reviewers will be referenced as “reviewers”). Reviews generally take place over a two week period; however, a third or fourth week may be added depending on the number of applications each reviewer must read and score, as well as how smoothly the review process progresses. Reviewers generally have knowledge, expertise, and/or experience in the subject of the grant or are skilled in project design, management, and evaluation (e.g., research methodology). Reviewers are selected based on their qualifications by education degree attained, experience and/or expertise in a particular discipline, program management experience, budget expertise, prior review experience, and/or recommendation by a program officer. Reviewers who register to review for a grant program are invited to participate and are expected to devote the hours required to complete a review according to scheduled deadlines. Reviewers are paid zero to \$500 per application reviewed; the average is about \$150.

Reviewers reside in all parts of the country and have varying degrees of personal experiences, so they may or may not be familiar with the geography, demographics, economics, politics, government structure and procedures, and/or business and industry in a particular region or state. For example, reviewers may not know that Nevada's Clark County School District (Las Vegas metropolitan area) is the fifth largest in the nation. As one reviewer asked me, “You mean Vegas actually has kids?” and another asked if I ate lunch frequently at a restaurant in Las Vegas, which would be about 450 miles from my work location in Carson City. If not provided with geographical background information, a statement in an application about geographical barriers in Nevada may be meaningless to someone from the East Coast who can travel through three or four states in less time than it takes to drive from Reno to Las Vegas. Nevada's Nye and Elko Counties are geographically the third and fourth largest counties in the continental U.S.; Nye is larger than the combined area of four states; Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Delaware. Often reviewers who have never ventured West of the Mississippi River cannot comprehend the geographical vastness and isolation, as well as biological and geological diversity in Western states.

THE REVIEWER'S JOB

The job of a reviewer is to read a proposal, critically analyze the merit of a project based strictly on what is presented in the application to fulfill grant program requirements, and assign numerical scores to a series of program selection criteria. The reviewer writes comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the applicant's project based on the grant program priorities, requirements, and selection criteria. The reviewer assigns a score for each selection criterion. Occasionally the program provides guidance and a rubric; however, rubrics are still a rarity. Therefore, it is imperative that the reviewer be thoroughly knowledgeable about the grant program by reading the RFA (RFP, NIA, FRN, NOFA)¹.

Unless the review is conducted solely by an individual reviewer, it will generally consist of a panel of two to five reviewers who work in their own locale and/or may travel for an onsite session to the grant program origin, generally Washington, D.C. A Panel Facilitator is assigned to each panel. The Panel Facilitator's job is not to influence scores, but to provide guidance in clarifying issues and answering questions, move the panel discussions along, check reviewer's comments, provide feedback to reviewers regarding suggested technical changes and/or corrections, and encourage panel members to try to agree on scores that are within an acceptable point range of discrepancy. An application with widely discrepant reviewer scores (e.g., 33, 51, 87 out of 100 possible points) may be required to be reviewed a second time to determine if reviewers can minimize the point spread.

¹ Request for Applications, Request for Proposals, Notice Inviting Applications, Federal Register Notice, Notice of Funding Announcement.

The reviewer is expected to consider the Panel Facilitator's comments and suggestions for changes. If the reviewer chooses not to change per the suggestions, it is expected the reviewer will discuss reasons why not with the Panel Facilitator and they will arrive at an agreement that satisfies both of them. At the conclusion of the formal review, the reviewers submit a final technical review for each applicant. The technical review will be provided to the applicants and may be posted for viewing by the public. Reviewer names may be made public; however, the applications they reviewed will not be disclosed.

Reviewers must sign a variety of assurances and information forms to ensure review integrity and avoid problems that could discredit the grant program or reviewer, or produce negative outcomes for applicants. Assurances and forms include, but are not limited to conflict of interest to ensure there is none, confidentiality agreement, and 1099 tax form to receive payment for services. Occasionally, a grant program will solicit volunteer reviewers for new programs; there is no payment. After the review has concluded and all forms, documents, and signed and dated technical reviews are submitted to the program, the reviewer is required to delete all online copies of applications, scores, and comments that the reviewer may have saved, and either shred all hard copies or mail them back to the contractor in charge of the review. Once the review is completed, the reviewer will no longer have access to the online documents; the reviewer cannot alter the completed technical review comments or scores.

REVIEW PANELS

Reviewers may be assigned to a panel generally comprised of two to five people who read and score the same three to 12 applications. Unless the review is onsite, the panel meets via phone for an initial conference with the Panel Facilitator to get to know each other and understand expectations. Reviewers then convene via phone at agreed dates and times to discuss the merit of the application and each of their scores. Reviewers are not allowed to discuss the applications prior to the phone conference dates to ensure that the scores are not unduly influenced. During a panel discussion, a reviewer might bring information to the attention of other reviewers who missed it, or that the reviewer knows from personal experience, knowledge, or expertise to be questionable. For example:

- One reviewer may score an application low for ". . . not realistic or feasible to complete the project on time and within budget." The reviewer might point out that 92% of the budget is earmarked for personnel salaries, while only 3% is earmarked for the target population support, the latter the focus and purpose of the project. Thus, to implement the project in the scope described, the 3% funding is unlikely to realistically support the target population costs.
- A reviewer may point out that what is touted as innovation in a project is not innovative, but is business-as-usual nationwide, has been replicated in varying forms for the last 15 years, or is a common project design that is not documented by measurable state or regional success.
- A reviewer might highlight that seven partners in the project are listed in the Abstract; however, as the project is described, only three partners are mentioned throughout the Narrative as having any involvement or participation in the project.
- A project specific evaluation required by the program might be described by a reviewer as a generic methodology that has not been modified for the proposed project, lacking realistic and feasible performance measures to document project efficacy.

Just the facts, Ma'am

To write for reviewers, eliminate the fluff and stick to the facts. Reviewers have neither the time nor desire to wade through 6, 7, or 20 pages of information that is irrelevant to the grant program priorities and selection criteria. On average, a reviewer receives a \$150 honorarium per application and must score three to 12 applications in a 10 day or less time period.

The 3 Cs: Clear, Concise, Coherent

CLEAR Precisely respond to priorities and selection criteria, always explaining what could be unknown, misunderstood, or erroneously assumed by a reviewer. Use the same terms as the grant program with only *one term for one meaning*. For example, a "pre-service teacher candidate" should always be referenced as exactly that and nothing else. Ensure that spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax are without errors. Reviewers want to be able to access information quickly and easily, so organize the sections of the application using the exact headings and sub-headings of the grant program priorities and selection criteria. Following is an example of headings and sub-headings in a Narrative, which should mimic the grant program priorities and criteria, as well as the application Table of Contents. Background information is generally not required, but should always be included in order to inform reviewers who may not be familiar with the applicant's state, geography, energy sources, infrastructure, economic base, population demographics, and/or history. Align project activities to budget costs. Example:

BACKGROUND

Nevada Population, Geography, Economy, Target Population Demographics

PRIORITY 1: INTERVENTION for LOW-INCOME TARGET POPULATION

Selection Criterion 1: Project Need

- a) Need for intervention documented by valid and reliable data
- b) Quality of the intervention as a new or established program
- c) Expected efficacy of the intervention

Selection Criterion 2: Project Design

- a) Goal(s)
- b) Measurable objective(s)
- c) Measurable, performance-based outcome(s)
- d) Activity(s) to achieve goals and objectives
- e) Benchmark(s) and Deliverable(s)

Selection Criterion 3: Adequacy of Resources

- a) Matching / in-kind resources (Budget Narrative line items X, XX, XX)
- b) Personnel (Budget Narrative line items X, XX, XX)
- c) Sustainability beyond the grant period (Budget Narrative line items X, XX, XX)

Selection Criterion 4: Management Plan

- a) Governance structure for the proposed project
- b) Partners
- c) Project staff and management protocol
- d) Timeline of activities and project deliverables correlated to goals, objectives, activities,
Budget Narrative line items

Selection Criterion 5: Evaluation Plan

- a) External evaluator
- b) Performance measures: Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA)
- c) Alternative measures (project specific objectives, outcomes, benchmarks, deliverables)
- d) Methodology and metrics: quantitative and qualitative data to be collected, analyzed,
and used to guide project activities and modifications

CONCISE Write sentences that pack a lot of information without the fluff. Use simple, readable charts, tables, and graphics to organize and compact information, data, and timelines.

COHERENT Never assume the reviewer is knowledgeable about acronyms, data, or familiarity with a location, organization, or event. Include a "Glossary of Terms and Acronyms" either following the Table of Contents, at the end of the Narrative, or as an Appendix. Terminology differs from region to region throughout the country. A cougar, Mexican lion, mountain lion, deer tiger, puma, Florida panther, swamp lion, and catamount are all the same animal. The terminology for the same animal changes depending on the region of the country. Without a clear definition or explanation of terminology, a reviewer may erroneously assume or interpret what the grant writer intended. For example, Nevada is the only state in which the 17 school districts are the 17 local education agencies (LEAs). In other states, each LEA is comprised of two or more school districts. Therefore, unless it is clearly explained, if the grant program uses the term LEA, it is imperative that a Nevada grant application neither substitute the term "school district" for LEA nor interchangeably use LEA and school district. Reviewer confusion may result in point deductions and a lower score for the applicant.

Processes and procedures, as well as interpretation of law, vary according to the area in which a reviewer resides or the reviewer's personal experiences. For example, if a Nevada grant professional states, "The Superintendent of Public Instruction will submit a Bill Draft Request (BDR) to the Legislature for consideration of new legislation", most reviewers will erroneously interpret that to mean the Superintendent is engaged in lobbying and/or it is illegally influencing legislators based on Federal regulations. In Nevada, the BDR is one process in how government business is conducted and is not lobbying or illegally influential. This must be explained.

Cover All Bases

FOLLOW DIRECTIONS • FOLLOW DIRECTIONS • FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

One of the common, major downfalls of grant applications is failure by the writer(s) to FOLLOW DIRECTIONS specified in the RFA. If the Narrative is limited to 30 pages, double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, 1" margins all sides of paper, then do not exceed 30 pages and FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS. If measurable outcomes and benchmarks are required and you are uncertain how to write them or compare them to baseline data, ASK FOR HELP. Reviewers often stare at an application section, shake their heads, and wonder what the heck the writer was thinking - or not thinking. ALWAYS focus the project proposal on Who, What, Why, Where, When, How, How Many, How Much, SO WHAT?

WHO

applicant background • target population • partners • key project personnel • subgrantees

WHAT

purpose • project design • steps / actions / activities / tasks to be accomplished •
measurable objectives • measurable outcomes • milestones / benchmarks • evaluation plan

WHY

project need • cost-effectiveness, return on investment • improvements •
short-term benefits • long-term benefits • use of technology • peer reviewed / other
references to support why the project is needed, has potential, will produce expected outcomes

WHERE

project activities location(s) • key personnel operating location(s) •
dissemination / communication / training / conferences / oversight locations

WHEN

TIMELINES: employment of key personnel • activities / milestones / benchmarks •
initiation and completion of activities / tasks / data collection / oversight / review / modifications
• reporting schedule • dissemination of information

HOW

governance structure • management plan • partner buy-in • systems • sustainability

HOW MANY

target population and other beneficiaries • number of active partners • scale-up

HOW MUCH

budget • budget justification (budget narrative) • time • cost matching / in-kind

SO WHAT?

summarize • recap • restate • why the project is great • funder benefit

One may now ask, **SO WHAT** is so difficult in writing a high-quality, competitive application? Do the little things really matter? Oh yes, they definitely do. A point lost here and there can mean the difference between funding and no funding. The "cut score" or point level at which funding occurs can be less than one point. When writing a discretionary grant application to maximize the competitive edge, the writer must **WRITE FOR REVIEW**, not the writer's employer, the applicant, or the grantor. Write for the reviewers and always assume the reviewers know nothing about the people, places, or events in the project which is proposed. This takes a bit more thought, some extra time, and looking through the lens of others; however, it will pay off when reviewers do not waste time and become frustrated or angry wading through pages of unnecessary information, dozens of appendices, and generic, vague text. Make every effort to ensure reviewers do not misinterpret, erroneously assume, or fail to comprehend what is written.

Work as a Reviewer

Reviewing grant applications provides tremendous insight into what makes or breaks a quality application. The best training for writing a high-quality, competitive grant application is to review applications for grant or subgrant programs. On pages 7-9 are resources to get started.

Where to Find Grant Programs Soliciting Peer Reviewers

Serving as a grant application peer reviewer is an excellent way to learn about the grant process, become familiar with a particular grant program and/or funding agency, learn about innovations in your area of interest, and network with colleagues and funding agency representatives in your field. Review panel service is one of the single best ways to prepare to write a high-quality, competitive grant proposal. Generally, reviewers receive a stipend and if applicable, travel expenses. However, some programs request volunteers.

Some Federal agencies rely heavily on higher education faculty and scholars to review and advise them on which proposals should be funded. For example, to review for the National Science Foundation, with rare exception one must have a doctoral degree. Other agencies look for experience and expertise in one or more disciplines, rather than level of education or degree attained. Agencies are always seeking to enrich their rosters of potential review panelists and many Federal agencies now provide information online about how to become a review panelist.

Private and corporate funders do not often solicit external reviewers. Instead, they may utilize employees, consultants, experts they invite to review, and/or a governing board.

U. S. Department of Education (ED) - Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE)

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/index.html>

U.S. Department of Health: Administration for Children and Families (HHS)

Includes a step-by-step process to becoming a grant reviewer. Also includes a list of frequently asked questions. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/grantreview/reviewing/apply_reviewer.html

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Includes the steps to take to sign up for the USDA peer review program.
<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/prs.html>

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)

<http://www.neh.gov/grants/index.html>

Human Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)

Located under the “Apply Now” section, includes a link to register to become a grant reviewer.
<https://grants.hrsa.gov/webReview>

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Lists the qualifications to become a SAMHSA grant reviewer. Includes a link to download their online application. <http://www.samhsa.gov/Grants/emailform/index.asp>

Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

This webpage includes a link to learn about this organization's programs, a link to review their handbook, and a link to submit your application. <http://www.imls.gov/reviewers/reviewers.shtm>

National Science Foundation (NSF)

<http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/policy/meritreview/reviewer.jsp>

Why You Should Volunteer to Serve As A NSF Reviewer

<http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/find/edlite-forecast.html>

FORECAST OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES UNDER THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAMS FOR FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2013

This website provides a list of funding opportunities and their application submission and review deadlines. You can estimate that a review may take two to six weeks after a submit deadline. Visit the program website and if there is no information about a peer review (i.e., Call for Peer Reviewers), e-mail the program officer and ask if there will be one and how you can receive information to apply as a peer reviewer. EXAMPLE:

CFDA = Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance

OESE = Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

OESE CFDA No. and Name	Application Notice	Application Deadline	Deadline for Intergovern- mental Review	Estimated Average Size/ Number of Awards	Program Contact Person
84.299A Demonstration Grants for Indian Children	12/20/2012	2/19/2013	4/19/2013	\$290,000 8	Lana Shaughnessy Lana.Shaughnessy@ed.gov Fax (202) 260-7779 Telephone (202) 205-2528
84.299B Indian Education Professional Development Grants	1/25/2013	3/1/2013	4/30/2013	\$370,000 6	Lana Shaughnessy Lana.Shaughnessy@ed.gov Fax (202) 260-7779 Telephone (202) 205-2528
84.330B Advance Placement - Test Fee Program	4/2/2013	6/3/2013	7/31/2013	\$438,280 42	Francisco Ramirez Francisco.Ramirez@ed.gov Fax (202) 260-8969 Telephone (202) 260-1541
84.412A Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge	8/19/2013	10/18/2013	12/17/2013	TBD 14	Tammy Proctor Tammy.Proctor@ed.gov Telephone: (202) 260-7803 FAX: (202) 205-4921

Other Resources

- **How to Become a Grant Reviewer**
By Karen M. Markin, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2008/06/2008060201c.htm>
- **A Guidebook for Federal Grant Reviewers**
By Karen A. Morison, *The Heritage Foundation*
http://www.coloradomtn.edu/File/Office_of_Sponsored_Programs/A%20GUIDEBOOK%20FOR%20FEDERAL%20GRANT%20REVIEWERS.pdf
- **NSF Grant Reviewer Tells All**
By Pamela L. Member, *Science Careers*
http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/2310/nsf_grant_reviewer_tells_all
- **eHOW.com**
How to Get Paid to Review Government Grant Proposals | eHow.com
http://www.ehow.com/how_4678471_paid-review-government-grant-proposals.html#ixzz1F6R9Q022
- Contact local agencies, institutions, organizations, and funders to find out if they use peer reviewers to review their grant and/or subgrant applications. Paid or not, it is valuable experience and provides insight into what funders want in grant and subgrant applications.

NOTES

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